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id: 14489
date: 3/2/2004 22:05
refid: 04BOGOTA2634
origin: Embassy Bogota
classification: CONFIDENTIAL
destination: 04BOGOTA469
header:

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 002634

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/15/2014
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [KJUS](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#) [GOV](#)
SUBJECT: WILL CONGRESS COME THROUGH FOR URIBE?

REF: BOGOTA 469

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.5 B & D.

1. (SBU) Summary: In January, President Uribe, in an effort to nudge a recalcitrant Congress toward passage of new reforms, announced plans to form three high-level special commissions to formulate proposals in the areas of economics, justice, and administration of the state. On February 17, the Administration and six of the largest formal political parties signed a pact to work on the three fronts. With Congress to reconvene on March 16, only the special justice commission has met, and its initial recommendations have already caused controversy. Our congressional interlocutors stress that while the special commissions are headline-grabbers made up of high-profile national figures, the Congress will have the final say on any reforms. We expect piecemeal progress on legislation at best. End Summary.

2. (U) In the aftermath of difficult congressional relations in December, President Uribe in early January called for three national commissions of prominent legislators, current and former members of government, business leaders, and opinion makers, as recommended by the parties. The commissions would study economic and fiscal reforms, justice sector reforms, and reforms to improve the efficiency of the state and reduce corruption. The latter would address elimination of some state institutions and privileged pension schemes as well as potential territorial reforms to reduce duplication of administration functions and costs.

3. (U) On February 17, with much fanfare, President Uribe and Interior and Justice Minister Sabas Pretelt signed a national political pact with six leading political parties and a handful of additional smaller political organizations, all Uribista. The pact committed the signatories to good-faith efforts to pass important economic, justice, and state reforms, including:

- Pension reform;
- Tax regime simplification;
- Implementation of oral arguments in judicial proceedings;
- Improvements in penal system;
- Streamlining of the judicial branch bureaucracy;
- Improvements to the civil service structure;
- Improved public contracting and reduction of transaction costs; and
- Elimination of unnecessary state structures and entities.

Liberal Party President Camilo Sanchez and Team Colombia (Equipo Colombia) President Luis Alfredo Ramos qualified their signatures by stressing they had not given Uribe a "blank check" and that new taxes, for example, were out of the question. Absent from the signing ceremony was the center-left Independent Democratic Party (PDI) of Bogota Mayor Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Garzon and Senator Antonio Navarro Wolff.

4. (U) The March 16-June 20 congressional session promises to have a loaded schedule. In addition to likely deliberation on any formal recommendations the three special commissions might make, the Congress must pass implementing legislation to carry out anti-terrorism reforms passed in December. The civil registry aspect of the anti-terrorism reform is already causing heated debate (septel). Furthermore, the conditional parole bill (alternatividad penal) for former fighters is a GOC priority for the session. Legislation to permit presidential reelection (septel) is also likely to make the agenda.

5. (C) Comment: The special commissions have their work cut out for them, as the subject matter they are charged with

addressing is both complicated and controversial. An initial offering of proposals by the special justice commission (streamlining the top levels of the national judiciary and establishing of new emergency speed-up procedures) launched a public feud between the heads of the Supreme and Constitutional Courts. On the economic side, pension reform is considered urgent, but a key pension measure failed in last October's Referendum and the Congress balked at making any modifications in the context of last December's fiscal reform package. Senior GOC economic officials tell us they are pessimistic about passage of sweeping pension reform.

16. (C) Comment (continued): Despite Uribe's overtures to the traditional parties and Congress--consulting the parties in naming special commission members and replacing the contentious Fernando Londono with the conciliatory Sabas Pretelt as Interior Minister--a strong current of resistance and resentment continues to run through Congress. Members continue to tell us that they resent Uribe's continued disparagement and/or neglect of the institution. This includes both Senate President German Vargas and House Speaker Alonso Acosta, who have publicly (and the latter privately with us) distanced themselves from Uribe. Rank and file members, meanwhile, have complained about not getting seats on the special commissions. The concurrent initiative to permit presidential reelection will further strain executive-legislative relations, as several of the presidential aspirants are members of Congress. While Uribe generally counts on majorities in both houses, those majorities have failed him (i.e., not showing up, breaking the quorum) on more than one key vote. While it is likely that several reforms will pass the Congress by June, it remains to be seen exactly which ones--and how many--will become law.

WOOD

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